

DVD Select: Theory and practical pile up in 'Driving Lessons'

by Robert_J_Hawkins

It won't be long now before the entire world stops what it is doing to catch the newest episode in the "Harry Potter" series - well, that would be the fifth movie and the seventh and final book, both of which come out this month.

'DRIVING LESSONS' - Rupert Grint tries to keep his eyes on the road in the funny coming-of-age film 'Driving Lessons.' CNS Photo courtesy of Jain Maidmont. Perhaps this is why the release schedule for movies on DVD is so lackluster.

One shining little star, available this week, also happens to feature a "Potter" cast member, Rupert Grint, who plays the hapless Harry sidekick, Ron Weasley. No, make that two cast members: Julie Walters. She plays Ron's loving mother, Molly.

The movie is a little comedy-drama called "Driving Lessons" (Sony, 3 stars) and it comes from the pen of the talented Jeremy Brock ("Last King of Scotland," "Mrs. Brown" and "Charlotte Gray"). It also marks Brock's directorial debut.

DVD RATINGS

4 stars: Don't miss: rent it/buy it

3 stars: Worth the risk: rent it

2 stars: On the tipping point: if nothing else is available

1 star: Don't bother: wait until it's in the \$1 bin

"Driving Lessons" is a very personal story for Brock, five years in the making and drawn quite a bit from his own childhood.

Grint plays a 17-year-old bundle of repressions named Ben Marshall. His life is defined by a controlling, manipulative and neurotically devoted Christian mother, Laura (the ever more-daring Laura Linney) and a growingly isolated father, the local church's vicar, Robert Marshall (Nicholas Farrell), who would prefer to retreat to his study and pile of books on birds and their mating calls than confront his witheringly and incessantly shrewish wife.

Laura's domestic carpet bombing is really a cover for one of her greater faults (albeit not in her's nor God's eyes). Laura is having an affair with the church's charismatic, hip and shallow junior cleric, Peter (Oliver Milburn). Her offensive - and she is offensive the way she twists God's plans and her own son's good nature to serve her carnality - includes taking young Ben out for frequent driving lessons, then leaving him in the parked car for an hour or so.

No wonder he flunks the driving test.

The game changes when Ben answers an ad in the local conservative Christian rag (where all advertisers are God's chosen ones) from an aging actress looking for a personal assistant. Poor Ben. Is it his fault that he lacks the imagination to flee when he first enters the shambled interior of the house of Dame Edith Walton (Julie Walters)?

The random cases of empty wine bottles might be a clue. Or the stacks of dusty books on every horizontal surface. Or maybe the disembodied voice of a foul-mouthed old coot that wafts in on a vinegary air from the weed-besotted garden?

No, Ben stays. And by movie's end, don't 'cha know, he is better for it.

Evie, as she prefers to be called in private, is as eccentric and convoluted and delusional and Ben is emotionally constipated. She is a short and coarse Katherine Hepburn - well, a bit more coarse than Kate. He is, well, Ben is a blank canvas. They make a nice pair, balancing out each other's substantial shortcomings.

None of this sits well with the manipulative Laura, who sees the grip on her kid slipping away.

Laura's thinly structured deceptions begin to reveal themselves as Ben spends more and more time with the equally demanding but immensely more entertaining Evie. At one point, Evie hijacks Ben for an overnight

camping trip, lies about her fragile health and then goes from camping to campy as she tricks him into driving her to Edinburgh, Scotland, for a poetry reading at a gay and lesbian festival that hungers for its own living Joan Collins ... well, Evie will do.

Ben, though, ends up nightclubbing with the hot festival administrative assistant Bryony (Michelle Duncan) and sends his personal growth trajectory up a few notches toward the stars. Not bad for a 17-year-old who only recently flunked his driving test.

The boy comes back from Edinburgh a man - and just in time, too, because his domestic life soon hits the fan.

You can by now see that the title "Driving Lessons" is a rather open-faced sandwich for getting a grip on life. Ben, to survive, needs to learn that adults will ultimately disappoint. They lie, they cheat, they manipulate - all the time honestly professing to do these things in the name of love.

He learns those lessons under the tutelage of Evie and the transparency of his own mother.

By the end of the movie, you get the feeling that Ben will turn out all right.

You also get the impression that some day, the Ron Weasley character will be but a (substantial) footnote in the illustrious career of Rupert Grint. (Well, that said, I warn you that next week there arrives another Grint movie, "Thunderpants," in which he harnesses the power of his substantial flatulence to save the world. It probably won't get reviewed here.)

ALSO THIS WEEK

"Funny Ha Ha" (Genius, not rated) This was the debut film of writer-director Andrew Bujalski, who was just doing what he knows best: Making a very-low-budget movie about a recent college graduate who still drinks like she's in college, wants a boyfriend and, maybe a decent part-time job. The movie has made some fans on the indie festival circuit and even launched a mini-movement around which other low-budget, barely scripted, self-conscious, minutely focused films have rallied: "mumblecore." Bujalski's subsequent films "Mutual Appreciation" and (as a writer/actor) "Hannah Takes the Stairs" have added to the appreciative audience growing around his work.

A few more:

- Operatic love triangle in "Puccini for Beginners" starring Elizabeth Reaser, Justin Kirk, Gretchen Mol, Jennifer Dundas and Julianne Nicholson and is written and directed by Maria Maggenti ("The Incredibly True Adventures of Two Girls in Love")

- A traffic accident brings together eight disparate groups of travelers on a steamy hot two-lane highway in "Jam"

- From director Jay Craven, "Disappearances," in which Kris Kristofferson is a man forced to break the law to save his family. (From the novel of the same name by Howard Frank Mosher).

IT CAME FROM TV

Season five of "Bewitched" (4 discs, 30 episodes) in which Endora turns Darin into the most selfish man ever; Napoleon shows up; Samantha, Serena and Uncle Arthur have their powers taken away; and Samantha discovers she is having a baby.

"George Lopez: America's Mexican" (HBO) The subtitle of this live HBO special from Phoenix is - Star. Spanglish. Banter - which about says it all for Lopez. He's funny and offensive. He's offensively funny. You've got to admit, brother, that if you can laugh with Lopez, you can't be hatin'.

"White Boyz in the Hood" (Showtime, season 1) I know this sounds like a George Lopez routine but it is really a comedy series featuring white boy comics who have honed their 'hood chops at urban clubs. Maybe it is a George Lopez routine and they don't know it ...

"Baseball's Most Unbreakable Feats" (Major League Baseball/Shout! Factory) There are 10 achievements from the diamond which seem untouchable by today's players - like Cal Ripkin Jr.'s 2,632 straight games; Ted Williams' .406 batting average; and Joe DiMaggio's six-game hitting streak. Current Yankees pampered pitcher of the season Roger Clemons is host of this television special.

FROM THE VAULTS

"The Stephen King Collector DVD Set" (MGM, 4 discs) As Hollywood releases the 10,972nd movie inspired by a Stephen King scribble - that would be the actually quite good "1408," which is neither a year nor a bus locker but a haunted hotel room - the savvy marketers at MGM have assembled a classic King movie into a box set - along with several, ahem, others. The classic is "Misery," with the Oscar-winning performance of Kathy Bates as an obsessive fan pitted against her favorite author (James Caan). The others are the Faustian tale "Needful Things" and George Romero's adaptation "The Dark Half" - both from 1993 and the TV version of "Carrie." None are really bad. The only thing really lacking imagination is the title of the box set.

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